

Head Teachers as Central Actors in Glocal Education Politics. A Real Story from Benin

Sarah Fichtner

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By: Sarah Fichtner, Sciences Po, Bordeaux

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Summary: Using data from a Beninese primary school, I argue for more ethnographic research to help us understand the daily manoeuvres head teachers in the Global South rely on in making schools work at the intersection of global reforms and local contexts.

Why is it that we have so little knowledge of the “street realities of headship” – as Ball (1987: 80) already mentioned in 1987 – while we all agree on head teachers’ pivotal role in making schools work? This is not to underestimate the influential work of Wolcott (2003 (1973)), presenting a rich ethnography of a school principal’s personal and professional life in the United States, or Ball’s own chapter on the “politics of leadership” in England (1987: 80ff.), Harber and Dadey’s (1993) analysis of head teachers’ roles in Botswana and Ghana, and the case studies from France and Chile compiled by Baudrit and Rich (2013) on the modalities of shared leadership. I am, nevertheless, puzzled by the absence of recent, empirically-grounded studies that shed light on the tension between the global and local (micro)politics of teaching, learning and managing, which head teachers face in their day-to-day work, especially in the Global South. Head teachers are the central actors of glocal education politics in doing the school at the intersection of global objectives and reforms and local, historically grown, social, cultural, and political contexts. How do they position themselves in this arena? How do they negotiate, translate, appropriate or circumvent reforms coming from the outside, or innovate and spread their own policies and “best practices” (which might be in conflict with official norms)?

Let me give you an example of a “real story” from northern Benin, where I conducted 11 months of ethnographic research in 2012/13 in a public primary school in a village I call Alafia. The head teacher is a young man, who started his teaching career 10 years ago. The school in Alafia is his

first post as a head teacher and I observe him in his second year. He lives in the village with one of his two wives and their three children. However, he does not want to remain head teacher and is inclined to pass the necessary exams in order to become a school inspector. Therefore, he takes good care of his reputation and his political and administrative networks. He is careful not to get too close to the village population as "they are difficult to handle", he tells me.

Nevertheless, he is motivated to be remembered by the village population as the head teacher who managed to develop the "incomplete" school that has never been able to offer all six grades due to a lack of teachers and classrooms, into a "complete" school that will eventually correspond to official norms and quality standards. He starts the academic year 2012/13 with two teachers and four classes, held in concrete classrooms built by a donor agency. He finishes the same year with four teachers and six classes, two held in rudimentary mud and straw-buildings, one constructed with financial help from an NGO, the other built by parents. To access government or donor funding for another "real" school building, he has to prove the school's need by providing photos of rudimentary classrooms and lists of pupils' names.

One of the two additional classes, the fourth grade, is not officially authorised, as it consists entirely of grade repeaters, and – following international advice – class repetition has been redefined in Benin from a pedagogical solution into a pedagogical, financial and social problem that should be diminished. Repetition of the first grade is officially forbidden since 2004, but the head teacher explains to me that the 34 repeaters among his 61 first graders are too young and too immature to pass on to second grade. There is no kindergarten or preschool in the village and some children need more time to get accustomed to the school environment and to the language of instruction that is French, he says.

The first grade teacher is a community teacher with no professional training, paid by village parents. Since 2008 the Beninese government has made an effort to train some of the community teachers and outlaw the rest as their lack of professional training is seen to correlate with low learning outcomes. The head would like to replace the community teacher with a state-trained and employed teacher, but in the current situation of a shortage of 10.000 teachers in Benin, he cannot rely on the State to send him more teaching staff; he has to "find" the teachers himself. Besides, the parents trust the community teacher, who has been teaching the first grade for four years; they value his experience more than a stranger's diploma. The head teacher is able to keep the community teacher despite the latter's "informal" status thanks to the school inspectors' practice of turning a blind eye to the issue. Manipulating his political and administrative networks, the head teacher manages to "find" two additional teachers, who are teacher trainees at teacher training colleges, willing to pass their obligatory practical year and exam in Alafia. One of them arrives in November, the other in December 2012, two months after the official beginning of the school year.

Even though he is responsible for teaching the sixth and final grade of his primary school, the head teacher devotes a big part of his instructional time to bureaucratic tasks that keep the school running despite its shortcomings: he writes requests for new buildings, for teachers, for

trainees, he counts pupils, fills in reports for the government or for international donor agencies, he fabricates numbers, hoping that one day the school he manages, the one in front of his eyes, will resemble the one he creates on paper.

When teaching, the head teacher tries to apply the teaching and learning objectives of the competency-based approach introduced in Beninese primary schools (as in so many other West African countries) in the 1990s/2000s. At the same time he is inclined to secure his pupils' success rates in the final exam (on which his career depends to a certain degree) through rigid memorisation and disciplinary measures, contradicting the philosophy of the competency-based approach.

Thus, the examples of a head teacher's workaday life in a Beninese primary school show that his practices are defined by social norms that guide his relations with the village population, by official norms dictating which practices are sanctioned or approved by the State, and by practical norms of what is or is not feasible in a given context (cf. Olivier de Sardan 2014: 407ff.). This case study reveals the merit of a critical analysis of the current situation of teaching and learning that focuses on school actors, on head teachers in particular, taking into account their complex role as agents of glocal education politics, and of their ways of juggling with both local and global constraints, expectations, imaginaries and norms. I hope that my research prompts greater interest in head teachers as actors and schools as sites of qualitative research, for the significant implications it has for education policy in the Global South.

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